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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TEL AVIV 005104

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SUBJECT: A/S WELCH DISCUSSES DISENGAGEMENT AND GAZA
CROSSINGS WITH MOD MOFAZ

Classified By: Ambassador Daniel C. Kurtzer. for Reason 1.4 (b) and (d)
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1. (C) Summary: A/S Welch, Ambassador Kurtzer and General Ward met with Minister of Defense Mofaz and his key staff on August 16 to review the status of settler evacuation from Gaza, and to discuss the status of an Israel-Egyptian protocol on troop deployments along Egypt's border with Gaza.

A/S Welch urged Mofaz to seek Egyptian views on Gaza crossings, with a view to finding a way to resolve differences over the issue of Rafah. Mofaz praised Palestinian security forces' efforts in Gaza, anticipated Egyptian agreement on a side letter that would address opposition and Likud political concerns about possible arms transfers to Palestinians, and expressed hope that an agreement on rubble would be concluded with PA Minister Dahlan. Mofaz also sounded an alarm about possible PIJ-initiated suicide bombings emanating from the Tulkarm area of the West Bank. Mofaz reaffirmed for General Ward Israel's concurrence with the provision of specific non-lethal equipment to the Palestinians. End Summary.

Palestinian Security Forces

2. (C) A/S Welch summarized the message the U.S. delegation had delivered to Palestinian security officials earlier on August 16 on the Gazan side of Karni (septel). "While most of the world is watching what the Government of Israel is doing, we told them we are looking at what they (the Palestinians) are doing to prepare for the day after (disengagement)." A/S Welch added that he had urged the Palestinians to show unity and sent the signal that "security is everything." A/S Welch described the meeting as a positive indication that the PA security forces under Nasir Yusif are working together and cooperating with Israeli authorities. General Ward said he had reinforced the message on the importance of PA efforts to keep things calm, and he had counseled the PA security services to work together on the ground. General Ward noted some indications that these messages are getting through.

Mofaz on Settler Evacuations

3. (C) Minister Mofaz indicated that the first phase of the disengagement plan is the most important because it is when settlers leave on their own. He estimated that 50 percent of the settlers would leave of their own accord. Force might have to be used to relocate others, including some 2,000 "resisters" who had entered and remained in Gaza contrary to GOI orders. The GOI arrested 150 such persons on August 16, and Mofaz predicted additional arrests to come as the IDF begins its next phase of operations. Ambassador Kurtzer asked Mofaz for his assessment of the level of violence. Mofaz cited several instances of conflicts between the IDF and settlers, but indicated that Israeli security services could cope. He is advocating a shorter timetable than originally planned for the completion of the evacuation.

Mofaz on Coordination: Some Praise for Palestinian Efforts

4. (C) Mofaz provided an account of the August 14 coordination meeting between ministers and committees charged with coordinating disengagement. He assessed that "coordination by both sides on the ground is very good." He recalled the early August 14 mortar incident near Neve Dekalim and Gadid, and noted that the following night there were only two firing incidents at Israeli positions in Gaza. In this regard, Mofaz acknowledged the efforts of PA battalions deployed and assessed that their interest is to keep the situation quiet. "They do not fully control what is happening in Gaza, but from the level of coordination, they are making efforts with good intentions." (Note: At the end of the meeting, Mofaz's aides informed him of a mortar firing on August 16.)

5. (C) Mofaz indicated that the August 14 meeting also resolved a misunderstanding regarding the status of West Bank settlements post-disengagement. While President Abbas always has, Nasir Yusif now understands that the legal status of the

West Bank area will not be changed, according to Mofaz. On Gaza, Mofaz said he revealed to Yusif that Israel forces would turn over to PA control in a single 24-to-36 hour period all of Gaza -- South/Central/North sectors -- rather than in the three or four phases, as originally anticipated by the Palestinians. Mofaz explained that an extended transition is not tenable, as it might result in images of IDF forces evacuating settlements juxtaposed with those of Palestinians raising flags over other evacuated areas. Mofaz anticipates another meeting with Palestinian counterparts during the week of August 21. Mofaz reaffirmed for General Ward Israel's concurrence with the provision of specific non-lethal equipment to the Palestinians.

Disengagement - Critical Phase After Evacuation of Settlers

16. (C) Once the settlers depart, the disengagement process will enter a critical phase, according to Mofaz. Hamas or other Palestinians could at that time attempt to penetrate the settlements before the IDF pulls down settler homes. "We do not want a confrontation with the Palestinians," Mofaz said, adding that IDF forces will be busy packing equipment left in settler homes into containers and then bringing them out of Gaza. Mofaz estimated that the timeframe for the destruction of the settlements -- once the last settlers have been evacuated -- will be two to four weeks until completion and the departure of the last IDF soldier from Gaza. Mofaz said he anticipates that the IDF will be out of Gaza and the northern West Bank settlements in October, much earlier than the six months envisaged earlier.

Egyptian-Israeli Negotiations

17. (C) Mofaz and MOD Deputy Director General Amos Gilad described in some detail the status of Israeli-Egyptian negotiations on a protocol governing the deployment of Egyptian forces along the border with Gaza (septel). Mofaz and Gilad said the military talks are moving in the right direction. Due to recent political requirements raised by the Israeli opposition (e.g., Lapid of Shinui) and even some in Likud, Gilad has been instructed to negotiate a side letter with the Egyptians that puts to paper their verbal commitment not to transfer arms to the Palestinians without coordination with Israel. Mofaz said he expects such a document by August 18, and recalled that he stressed to Egyptian MOD Tantawi and EGIS Head Suleiman over the weekend of August 13-14 that it will be important to conclude the agreement within a week so that the IDF can leave Gaza and the Philadelphia corridor as soon as possible. Mofaz expressed his opinion that the Israeli Government will approve the agreement, but (under an agreement that PM Sharon struck with MK Yuval Steinitz) it must first be approved by the Knesset before it can be signed and implemented.

Gaza Crossings

18. (C) Mofaz recalled that the Israeli cabinet had decided on two options for Gaza on customs and access issues:

-- keep the current customs system in place while allowing people to move from Egypt to Gaza via a new crossing to be built at Kerem Shalom at the intersection of Gaza, Egypt and Israel, and moving goods via the Nizzana passage, farther south on the Israel-Egypt border; or

-- abrogate the customs union (effectively creating one customs system for Gaza and another for the West Bank), and let the Palestinians control Rafah, but treat Karni (for goods) and Erez (for people) as formal border crossings and customs frontiers. Mofaz commented that this option would require "deep" inspections by the Israeli side, and would run against the direction of plans being discussed by QSE Wolfensohn and PA Minister Dahlan, as it would have a negative impact on the movement of people and goods between Gaza and the West Bank.

19. (C) Mofaz indicated that he had discussed these Israeli options with Dahlan, and he anticipates a follow-on discussion "in the next week." A/S Welch asked whether Mofaz had discussed the subject with the Egyptians. Mofaz replied that they had not, but he anticipated that the Egyptians would support "whatever Dahlan wants," which he expects will be a bilateral, open passage at Rafah for goods and people. Ambassador Kurtzer suggested that the GOI seek Egyptian views directly, as the Egyptians also have interests: "Do not assume they will do just what Dahlan wants." A/S Welch urged Mofaz to use the Egyptians on this issue because they too will not want to permit unrestricted access into Gaza. Mofaz agreed that the GOI and the Egyptian EGIS share concerns about arms smuggling and travel of "outside terrorists" to

and from Gaza.

110. (C) A/S Welch again urged Mofaz to look more closely at the Rafah options with a view to designing a system that might work, and reduce security risks. "Rafah is symbolically very important," A/S Welch concluded, asking Mofaz to take a look at how a third party might contribute to customs and name-checking at Rafah. Mofaz replied that his priority is to accomplish the deployment of 750 Egyptians along the Egypt-Gaza border.

Agreement on Rubble

111. (C) Mofaz complained that the Palestinians do not want to sign the agreement on disposition of settler housing demolition rubble that he, Dahlan and QSE Wolfensohn agreed to recently. Mofaz described the parameters of the agreement, noting that some rubble will go to Egypt and some will be used for construction purposes in Gaza. Asbestos and other dangerous material will be taken to Israel for safe disposal. Mofaz said he will meet with Dahlan "within the next week and we will close this issue."

Worried about PIJ in the West Bank

112. (C) Mofaz expressed concern about possible PIJ-initiated suicide bomber attacks from Tulkarm and Jenin. He indicated the IDF is taking serious measures to try to stop them.

113. (U) NEA A/S Welch has cleared this cable.

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KURTZER